

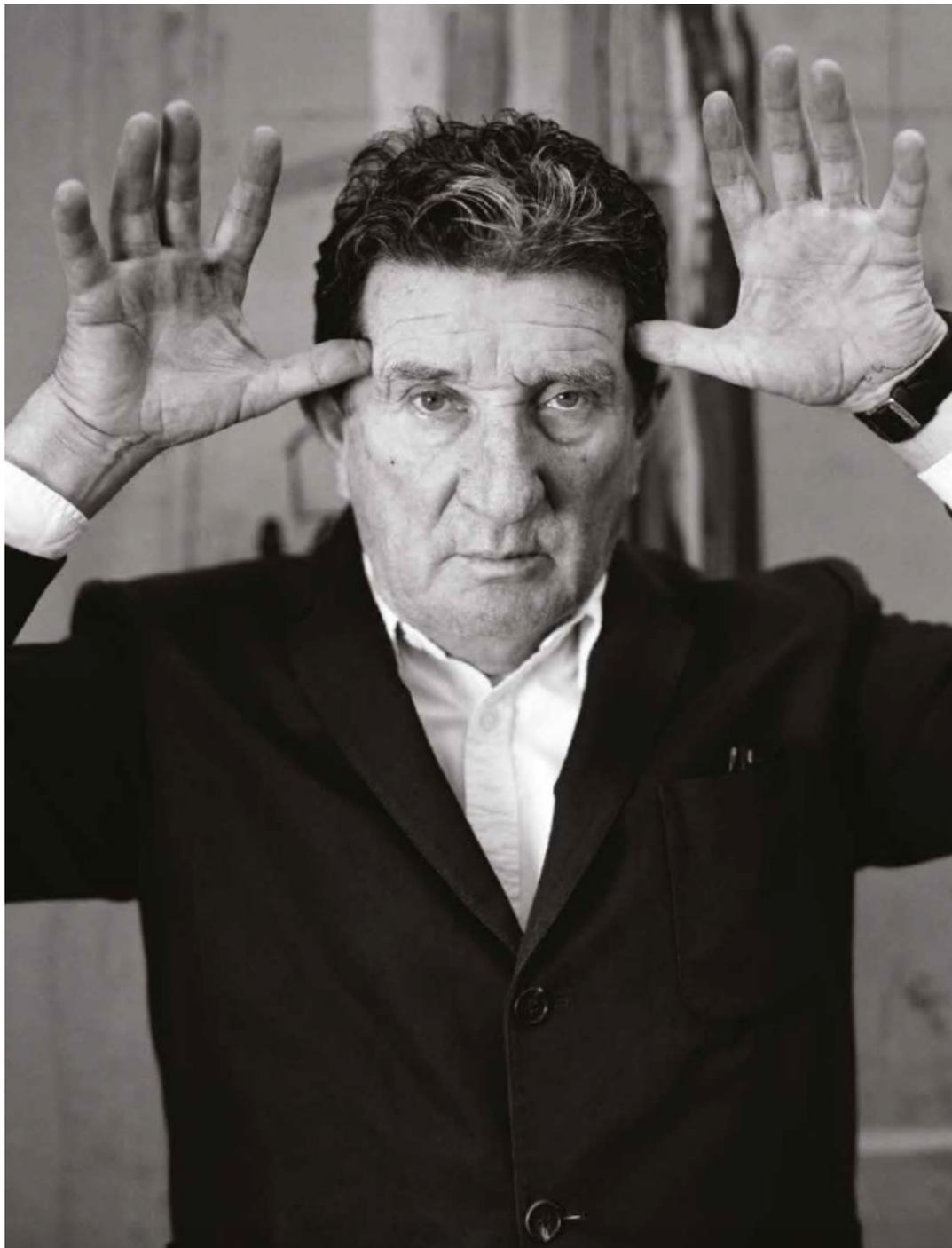
Tanya Leighton



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In a playful exploration of temporal and spatial planes, Bruce McLean often substitutes his body for the art form. By dissecting the role of the artist, – whether that be through questioning traditional means of display, such as in his early *Pose Works*, or removing the artwork all together (in what has become a perpetual quest to achieve “a truly great invisible sculpture”), McLean’s work is etched into the legacy of the British conceptual art movement.

Following a recent solo show of his paintings at Bernard Jacobson Gallery, I caught up with McLean at his studio in West London in the downtime before beginning his next project. Over black coffee and to a soundtrack of Miles Davis and Kevin Coyne, we discussed finding inspiration in the everyday and how art might shape the future.

Oliver Eglin: What made you want to become an artist?

Bruce McLean: My mother took me to the Glasgow School of Art for Saturday morning classes at the age of six. There was a Spanish woman who made us all paint to music on big bits of paper spread all over the floor. I thought to myself “bloody hell, this is the life.” It wasn’t like at school where you’re stuck with one bit of A4 sugar paper and a broken pencil.

Then at the age of eight, I went to the class of Paul Zunterstein, who was a sculpture tutor. He was very sympathetic to me; he showed me all sorts of books on: Constantin Brâncuși,

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Germaine Richier, Richard Stankiewicz, and Alberto Giacometti. I was immersed in this world of sculpture and I thought it was fantastic!

OE: You've worked in many different forms, be it: painting, sculpture, photography, film, or ceramics. How does your working process begin?

BM: I get angry about something. I used to make work about things that made me angry. Right now I'm planning on making another film and by making that film it may generate some paintings or it may generate something else. I never understood this idea that you become a painter and that's all that you do. I trained as a sculptor and that's what I think of myself as and everything else is a kind of a departure from or an extension of sculpture.

OE: It's the idea that dictates the form, rather than the other way around.

BM: You have to do what you have to do; you have to be free. I thought the idea of being an artist was that you could do what you wanted, you could be who you wanted, and you could push the boundaries. A lot of things have been broken down and things are possible now which weren't before.

OE: What about photography, how did that become part of your practice?

BM: I made a sculpture in a room which used the wall and the floor to support aspects of the work. So I thought I better document the fact that I've done it. I was trying to photograph it and I couldn't; the lens wasn't wide enough, I couldn't get back far enough, so I thought why don't I just photograph fragments of it and then stick it together. I did but it didn't work, so I took it all into the street where I could see the whole thing. I photographed it in the street and then of course a car would come by, a woman with a pram, and then a dog would piss on it. [At first] I thought "oh for fucks sake" and then I thought "no, this *is* the work, that's *it*." The dog is real and you've got to contend with that. That opened things up, by accepting the street as part of the piece.

OE: So it was sort of an accident at first and then you realised that actually photography is another plane, it takes the work to another level.

BM: We'd been trained rigorously at St. Martins to question everything we did. Why was it here? Why wasn't it there? Why wasn't it under there? It was good to get it in the street and have to think "do you want that wall there?" and if you don't want that wall there then don't put it there, put it somewhere else. It got our stuff into the world and away from the pretence of this white cube.

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OE: This makes me think about a divergence in the way that British artists were working, in comparison with the land art movement in America of the time. In particular those of you who were dealing with photography, I'm thinking of Keith Arnatt, Gilbert and George, yourself, you were utilising these quite modest suburban spaces.



BM: Are you referring to Michael Heizer?

OE: Robert Smithson, James Turrell, Walter De Maria; they were using these enormous expanses of land which you just don't have working in London. The landscape in the UK doesn't have that sense of vastness that you have in America. In a way what's nice is that your environment became part of the work.

BM: Yes people thought it was very strange that I would make sculptures for the pond in Barnes.

OE: But that's what allows the humour to come into the work. With Michael Heizer you have this kind of macho, very serious approach, whereas when you're working at a duck pond in Barnes you just can't have that. I wonder how aware were you of Heizer's work at the time, did it feel quite distant?

BM: No, don't forget we had Richard Long over here also, he was wandering up and down in

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the landscape. It all happened very quickly, there was a big exchange of information. Although there was no Facebook and all this sort of stuff, there was: Xeroxes postcards, telephones, television, and a lot of stuff travelled quite quickly.

OE: Did you have the chance to meet with any of the American artists?

BM: I met Robert Smithson.



OE: Was that after he'd created Spiral Jetty?

BM: Yes. He was at the ICA sitting on his own so I started talking to him. He seemed like a nice guy to me.

OE: Who would you say is still making progressive thought-provoking work now?

BM: I don't know. There will be people making it, but they won't be making it in the context of which we know: I don't think they're making it in the context of these big galleries, I don't think they're making it in the context of anything we are aware of.

OE: What is the role of experimental art today?

BM: We've got to change that – get rid of the art bit. Art is the thing that gets in the way. The role is to question things. We seem to be destroying everything from the past for some peculiar

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reason. A lot of history has been forgotten; art history is not taught as a subject in art schools any more, it's all art theory.

OE: People are too quick to dismiss the past.

BM: In Scotland in about 1600, the government passed a law that every village that had a church also had to have a school, and in that they had to have a school teacher who would teach numeracy and literacy. It was free. There was a culture of learning and a culture of information, and that's what we need.



OE: With the rise in tuition fees there seems now to be this notion of education as a commodity, perhaps this is why we appear to have lost some sense of an artistic community. Do you think there is a need for more collaboration between artists; should we be more trusting of one another?

BM: In order to work with anybody you have to trust them. Trust is the most important thing and just to hear that I think "well that's a step in the right direction" you need to get people thinking about it.

OE: Can you give an example?

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BM: I was asked to run the painting department at the Slade School of Art. I said "I'll do that as long as I can work with, you, you, her and her." There were four of us, two men and two women, and I chose them because I liked them, but also because I trusted them. By that I mean I didn't have any doubts about what they would say to the students, I knew they would treat them with love, attention, and care, and if they wanted to set things up and do things separately they didn't have to ask me to do it they just did it. I trusted them to do the job. I think that's the only way to operate.

OE: Can artists change the world?

BM: I think art is very important, it can and is changing the world.